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Political Jargon and Rhetoric: How Has It Changed and how is It Understood

Language is a broad term and it has many uses and implications across the entire social sphere. In the land of politics, the way language is used and its meaning is often times broad and nebulous. In a time where politics are arguably more complicated than they have ever been, the associated rhetoric has also risen in complexity. Political language has borrowed from other spheres such as business and administration to create a certain type of jargon and discourse that is thick to sift through and difficult to filter meaning out of. In the political and social climate of the twenty-first century, this can prove to be problematic. Politics extend behind the United States on a global scale, and many issues are interconnected. Being able to understand our candidates and representatives should be crucial at this time, and yet much of the debate and discussion is slathered in dense jargon and rhetoric. The way that citizens make sense out of issues and the language behind them is a large part of how any democratic society operates, and for this reason it’s important that they should understand the jargon. I want to know how well people are able to sift through dense political language, and how they feel about the motives and meanings behind it. The evolution and pathway of political language and rhetoric is also interesting, as trends on how it has changed can reveal new predictions on where political discourse may go and what it will eventually look like.

FIRST HEADER: Secondary Research, Literary Background

Researching political discourse, I have found that there have been certain divisions in jargon based on just the kind of politics we’re talking about. For example, the political left has its own distinct set of terminology that progressives have built on top of for years. Other areas, such as mainstream and higher level partisan politics borrow from business jargon. Some phrases borrow from metaphor that have been used in the past and stuck around, and Nicholas Howe states in his paper “Metaphor in Contemporary American Political Discourse” that political metaphors can be separated between those used by politicians addressing the public and by politicians as a part of their jargon in discussing the political process. When speaking towards the public, politicians tend to use more metaphors that may influence public opinion and move votes over in their favor. On the other hand, metaphors by professional politicians as a part of jargon tend to arise internally, and according to Howe, most are derived from the language of sports and war. He speaks that “sports metaphors depict politics as a rule bound contest between two opponents. These metaphors are valuable for an electoral system in which one sides seeks to defeat the other but cannot eradicate it” (Howe, 2009), and then says “the two-party system in America promotes the use and efficacy of these metaphors, because our most popular sports feature two teams or individuals” (How, 2009). On the other hand, the phrase “guerrilla warfare” has also been used to describe certain political happenings, such as when a group inside congress uses tactics intended to obstruct or block certain bills, or when there is infighting inside of a political party. Both sports and war metaphors can be divided down into more descriptive metaphors as well (Howe).

Inside the area of leftist political activism, there is also a specific set of terminology and words that constitute a distinct sect. Terms such as “privilege”, “ally”, and “classism” are common terms you will hear amongst a group of activists and left-leaning individuals, but this terminology is also distinct with what you may have heard from activists in say, the 1960s. Author Stephen D’Arcy, who goes by the handle stevedarcy on his blog, states that members of the Black Panther Party in the 1970s would use a terminology the contained more words such as “liberation” “oppression” and “the people”. There are certain reasons for this shift in language, and D’Arcy likens it to shifts in the way the left now perceives things. He states in his blog article “The Rise of the Post-New Left Political Vocabulary”:

The older vocabulary looked at capitalism, racism, and sexism (for example) as social systems or institutions that could and probably would be defeated, once and for all, in the foreseeable future. Accordingly, activists of that era defined and described their movements as struggles for “socialism,” “black liberation,” or “women’s liberation.” By contrast, the new vocabulary tends to suspend judgement on (without denying) the prospects for ultimate victory, and to focus its attention on challenging everyday impacts of capitalism, racialization and gender, in the here and now.

Shifts in emphasis from system dynamics to more interpersonal dynamics (a key part in the concept and understanding of privilege) and commonality to specificity is another. While the use and effectiveness of both of these vocabularies can be spoken for, D’Arcy insists that both ways of speaking bring up extremely important concerns and we shouldn’t be quick to give up either one (stevedarcy, 2014).

According to writers Nicholas Johnston and Jonathan Allen, jargon creates words and phrases the turn citizens into categories and microcategories, causes language to incite anger and passion, and turns words that refer to positions of power into inside baseball positions. Jargon use to mainly be confined to the insides of the political world, but now in an era of CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, and others, jargon is thrown around by commentators who want to pass across as insiders. New terms can be brought up every election season, so some jargon can have some cloudy background. Some of these phrases are problematic in the sense they can reduce complex ideas into a mere few words, and sometimes people are moved into groups with names such as “NASCAR dad” or “Wal-Mart Mom” (Johnston, Allen 2016). This can bring more harm on a voting populous as such jargon can mean less time discussing issues and more time clearing up messy language.

An article published by the BBC gives an example of President Barack Obama making use of business jargon when he claimed that “history tells us that while these truths may be self-evident, they have never been self-executing”. The article claims that past influential presidents wouldn’t have been able to recognize this way of speaking, and this sort of talking is worthy of invoking suspicion, as it’s more fitting to come from the mouth of a lawyer. American politicians using business jargon has been occurring since the early 1980s, according to Hank Sheinkopf, a political advisor. This time coincides with a growth of global capitalism and a lessening influence of labor unions. Business language can be a way to conceal certain meanings, and is a way of appealing neutral. It also aids in making politicians appear authoritative and objective. Sheinkopf states that we’re now more driven by personality than ideology, and this more neutral way of speaking can appeal to that. Douglas Schoen, a pollster, thinks that business speak is a way to talk about partisan topics in a non-partisan way. It’s a method to gloss over issues in a time where there is a pretty large dichotomy between parties. Another interesting point is that corporate terminology can be used to dodge media scrutiny (BBC, 2013). It can be used to avert risk, as word placement is seen as very important in current politics. Regardless, business speak seems to be a discreet and effective way of outmaneuvering public, journalistic, and media scrutiny while also slathering another thick coat of jargon to give those high up in politics something to chew over.

Write about what has already been written and researched on this topic. Stay neutral. NOT A LIST OF SUMMARIES.

SECOND HEADER: Your Research Methods and Findings.

Explain what you wanted to find out, what you did for your research, and what you found.

THIRD HEADER: Discussion of Everything – Argument.

Based on what you read and what you found in your research, here is what you conclude. Several pages.

Summarize everything.

(white space)

Concluding paragraph. Same as others.

Works Cited